

A Synthesis of Take-Aways from Analysis of Teaching

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This semester's Analysis of Teaching class was enriching and eye-opening. In this class, I gained new perspectives of good teaching from a variety of literature, my professor and class discussions. I also learned how to describe and analyze the teacher's vision of good teaching using the lenses from the literature and interview and observation data. In this paper, I will elaborate on the three biggest take-aways from this class with my own experience.

#### *Teacher Observation Is a Useful Tool*

My first take-away from this class is that teacher observation is a useful tool for analyzing and mediating teaching. The impression I got of teacher observation in China is an open lesson or a demonstration lesson, where teachers always want to show their best side to other teachers or professionals. Some teachers give the lesson as they usually do, but some teachers, in order to give others a good impression, rehearse before the lesson, and some even arrange certain students to answer specific questions beforehand. Given this experience in school, I used to think that teacher observation was all about watching a teacher demonstrating the best part of his or her teaching which they have been rehearsing with the students for a long time. However, after I started my study at Peabody, I realized that there is much more to teacher observation.

First of all, through observations with interviews, we get to know a teacher's vision of good teaching and how it is enacted in the classroom. It is an essential part of this class to conduct interviews with an assigned teacher and do observations in her classroom. Throughout the semester, our group (Cecilia, Megan and I) conducted two interviews and observations in Ms. Porter's class at Apollo Middle School. Through conducting this project, we found out what Ms. Porter's vision of good teaching is and learned how to recognize and describe good teaching

using different lenses we discussed in class. Thus, the teacher observation we conducted for this class enabled us to analyze the teacher's vision of good teaching with data to support it.

Second, Maggioli (2012) mentioned that observing is a valuable awareness raising tool for teaching, assessing and evaluating. I appreciate her idea about observing and being observed (see Figure 1). In her book, she claimed that teachers of teachers (ToT) observe aspiring teachers to assess and mediate their learning of teaching skills; but when the intention of observation is to demonstrate or model a teaching skill or concept, then the ToT are to be observed. Also, lesson observation provides reciprocal scaffolding: aspiring teachers observe their peers to reflect on their own teaching because they are able to see someone who is at their level performing the same task. Through this reflection, the observers develop metacognitive skills about their own performance (Maggioli, 2012). This peer observation reminds me of the lesson presentations I have done in several classes at Peabody: Everyone in the class presented a lesson or part of a lesson in front of their classmates and got feedback on their presentations and their ability to deliver instruction, which is called "teaching rehearsal" by Jiménez & Rose (2010). I found feedback from my peers, as well as my instructors, really valuable and helpful. It provided me with suggestions on improving my lesson as well as details I overlooked in my delivery of instruction. This kind of observation – "teaching rehearsal" – is a valuable tool for mediating teaching.

However, Lortie (1975) found that apprenticeships of observation delayed or inhibited the professional identity development of teachers. In his study, the teachers tended to imitate their former teachers and colleagues whom they admired or considered successful rather than to apply their personal pedagogies according to the specific situations of their own classrooms and students.

Therefore, it should be noted that observation is not about imitation. On one hand, we should consider observation a useful tool to analyze and mediate teaching; on the other hand, we should critically examine what we observe and make pedagogical decisions according to the situations of our own classroom, rather than “copy” everything from the teachers we find successful. Thus, in order to maximize the utility of observation, we should speculate about what we are going to observe and discuss critically what has been observed (Maggioli, 2012).

*Teachers Are Also Learners: Social Constructivism and “Problem-Posing” Education*

The small group discussion on April 17<sup>th</sup> shed light upon how knowledge is acquired. During the discussion, Lee compared his thoughts before and after he came to Peabody. According to Lee, he believed that teachers should be the only source of knowledge (personal communication, X. Lee, April 17, 2014). I used to hold exactly the same belief as Lee. The education I received in China made me take it for granted that the teacher is the only one who can be the authority of knowledge, while students are being “fed” knowledge by the teacher. Seldom did we have the opportunities for pair or group discussion, nor did we dare to doubt the teachers due to fear of being scolded.

However, after I came to the United States and experienced graduate school classes, I realized there is another way to gain knowledge – teachers and students work together to build up knowledge. In almost every graduate school class I took, the teacher allotted a large portion of class time to student discussion and questions; the teachers welcomed students’ questions and queries, and tried to work on solving the problems together with the whole class. Besides my own experience at Peabody, I noticed that Ms. Porter frequently asked for peer talk in terms of pair work and group work in class during my observation. She not only fostered a lot of student-student talk, but also teacher-student talk: While students were having discussions, she

constantly circulated around the classroom to check in with each pair and kept asking students questions to guide them to the solution step by step.

The way of building knowledge I experienced in my classes and my class observation is validated by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism and Freire's (2000) "problem-posing"<sup>1</sup> education, both of which emphasize thinking and searching for knowledge through dialogue and interaction, and the joint responsibility for the learning process. In this case, teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge, and students are not the only ones who are receiving knowledge – teachers are also learners. Teachers and students construct knowledge together.

Now I figured why Chinese students are generally considered "uncreative." Students are used to being "fed" knowledge without thinking and questioning, thus gradually losing their creativity. As Wood (1999) mentioned, "academic productivity requires social productivity." To achieve productivity in my future classroom, I will act not only as a teacher for my students, but also as a learner of my students, giving my students ample opportunities to construct knowledge by themselves while scaffolding them during the learning process. My class will work together as a learning community in which cooperative learning takes place. I will also encourage my students to challenge what they are learning and "think outside the box" to promote their higher-order thinking skills.

### *Good Relationships Are Important*

In the small group discussion as well as in our class throughout the semester, teachers' relationships with students have always been a topic. During our group's initial observation, Ms. Porter told us she believes that she has developed good relationships with her students by talking to them during lunchtime and in class, and also by spending time with the students during PE

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<sup>1</sup> According to Freire (2000), "problem-posing" education refers to a method of teaching that emphasizes critical thinking for the purpose of liberation, which includes searching for knowledge in the process of dialogue, teachers and students learning from each other as learning partners, etc.

class, and thus, there have been very few behavioral issues in her class. In our small group discussion, Courtney also mentioned that good personal relationships with students help with disciplinary actions. She observed a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class, where the teacher keeps discipline well by developing good personal relationships with kids. She makes her students personally accountable for their actions. Oftentimes by simply asking a student if he or she is following instructions, the teacher can get the student to refocus on the proper task.

According to Risko & Walker-Dahlhouse (2012), “genuine caring” involves responding to students’ needs (e.g., academic, social, emotional and language) and developing trusting relationships with others. “Genuine caring” is a prerequisite for the teacher (Gay, 2010): only if students’ social and emotional needs are taken care of can they have a higher academic achievement. When students know that they are known by the teacher, they feel safer and tend to better be able to use their time for learning (Wood, 1999).

Therefore, teachers developing good relationships with students can not only help with disciplinary actions, but can also contribute to students’ academic success. In my future classroom, I will spend time getting to know my students and develop a caring and trusting relationship with them. However, the obstacle for me will be having to work hard on dealing with my “borderland discourse<sup>2</sup>” – I attempt to be someone my students can relate to but must maintain my identity as a teacher in the classroom.

Although teachers’ relationships with students are being emphasized in various personal experiences and literature, teachers’ relationships with parents are often ignored by some educators. For example, Ms. Porter does not have many connections with her students’ parents because she thinks it is hard to communicate with them due to their different linguistic and

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<sup>2</sup> “Borderland discourse” is the “discourse combining student and teacher subjectivities and taking into consideration both personal and professional identity positions” (Alsup, 2006).

cultural backgrounds. According to my experience, teachers should also build good relationships with parents. On my fieldtrip to Tusculum Elementary School last semester, the teachers told me that students achieve faster academic growth when their parents are able to help (K. DeNamur, personal communication, October 25, 2013). Allen (2007) also mentioned that building a trusting relationship with parents can help students attain academic success. Thus, I will also build mutual trust with parents and involve parents in my students' academic lives.

### *Conclusion*

This semester's learning challenged some of my old ideas about good teaching, shaped my thoughts and beliefs of good teaching, and helped me develop my own vision of good teaching. My take-aways from this semester's classes, observation and interviews will serve as guidelines in my teaching path which I will constantly refer to in order to improve my teaching. It is also to be noted that the development of good teaching is an ongoing process which requires updates of pedagogical knowledge. Thus, I will also keep abreast with the newest theories and research findings to update my "database" of pedagogy.

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Appendix

Figure 1

